

New Interpretations of the Movie Theatre

Maeve Connolly has noted a widespread tendency among artists to produce, inside art venues such as exhibition galleries or pavilions, what she calls ‘cine-material installations’, that is, works that recreate the architecture of cinema. These artworks do not limit to create ‘black-boxes’ inside the gallery space, but explore and elaborate more radically on the structure of movie theatres.¹ According to Connolly, the reference to the cinema as a venue for collective viewing enables an investigation of the reception of contemporary art. She stresses that, by evoking a different viewing context, art rethinks and reconfigures its relationship with its own viewers or public:

[I]t is . . . possible to identify a greater emphasis on the collective and social dimensions of reception, to the extent that cinema may even be understood specifically for its historical associations with an ideal public sphere. In other words, cinema history (rather than film theory) seems to hold an appeal for some practitioners because it may offer models or prototypes for the community.²

Designing their works on the model of the architectures of movie theatres, artists explore the possibility of restoring a social space within the gallery, in a context where also film consumption has become more and more an individual and solitary practice. Erika Balsom argues that moving-image installations (part of what she calls ‘othered cinema’)³ draw the attention back to the social and shared dimension of reception:

[T]he othered cinema evinces a distinct emphasis on cinema as a public institution throughout its many facets. The museum and gallery emerge as public sites of spectatorship in an era marked by individual, domestic viewing, while many artists take up questions of collectivity, sociality, and publicity in their work.⁴

In particular, in Balsom’s view, installations of this kind are charged with a sense of nostalgia for the cinema not only in terms of its material support, the film reel, but also as a public space, a site of relationality now gradually replaced by forms of individual viewing.⁵ The reference to forms of fruition historically associated with the cinema is therefore

associated with the role of public sphere that the latter has assumed since its origins.⁶

Very similar phenomena can be observed in contemporary museums, many of which started, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, including auditoriums for film screenings or actual movie theatres⁷ (as for IMAX theatres, which have now become commonplace, especially in science museums). However, I am especially interested in exhibitions that ‘incorporate’ the movie theatre – or, conversely, in movie theatres that ‘colonise’ the exhibition space.⁸ I will investigate exhibitions that blur the distinction between cinematic and museum reception, and where the display itself takes on the form of a ‘movie theatre’. The introduction inside the museum of a space that follows the rules (or at least some of the rules) of a movie theatre implies a very specific management of time, especially when the projection has a clear beginning and end, and introduces the possibility of regulating, more or less strictly, the visitor’s itineraries.

These practices imply also a problematic issue. As Balsom stresses, the tendency of museums of seeking spectacular effects in order to attract a wider public: ‘cinema’s entry in the museums is . . . a matter of that institution’s desire to (post)modernize by proving an experience of technological seduction that would guarantee box office revenues’.⁹ Today, spectacular presentation forms and a bold use of technology are used by museums as a mean to surprise and captivate visitors. The case studies examined in the following pages epitomise how the cross-pollination between the viewing experiences of the museum and the cinema may involve a spectacular dimension, positioning museums among the other sites of entertainment and problematising their very identity.

‘A BIT LIKE A LARGE CINEMA’: THE BIG PICTURE SHOW AT THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM NORTH

‘A globe shattered into fragments’, whose ruins are recomposed into a combination of inclined planes, curves, and edges, interlocked and divided into three sections representing the elements of earth, air, and water:¹⁰ here is, in a few words, Daniel Libeskind’s project for the Imperial War Museum North, in Manchester. Aiming to give an architectural form to the devastations of war, Libeskind designed a dramatic and fragmented structure that could not fail to affect the museum’s interior spatial configuration. The floor of the central exhibition space, on the first level, is slightly curved, and all the columns are slanted with respect to the perpendicular plane, conveying a sense of unease and of altered balance. The continuity of this space is in turn broken by the so-called ‘silos’ – six exhibition areas, enclosed by walls more

than 10 m high, each focusing on a specific aspect of the conflict, such as the experience of soldiers and the life of civilians during wartime, and contributing to the configuration of an irregular space that is devoid of reference points. Several large exhibits stand in the centre of the space: a tank, a jet, a few military vehicles, and some pieces of artillery. What prevails is a complex spatial fragmentation that imposes on the visitor a likewise fragmented and non-linear space filled with deviations and asperities. Audio stations, screens with audio-visual material and interactive devices are distributed so as to seamlessly integrate the lettering on the walls and display cases. Architectural critic Giles Worsley comments that the resulting effect is 'surprisingly low-tech but impressively effective'.¹¹

At regular intervals, the main room is plunged into darkness, and a recorded voice reminds us that 'every image, every document, every voice is part of someone's story'. This announcement marks the beginning of the Big Picture Show, an hourly multi-media performance that literally invades the entire exhibition space: a system of projections accompanied by an audio commentary covers in images not only the blank spaces on the walls but also the display cases, the artefacts, and even the visitors. The integration between the images of the Big Picture Show and the rest of the exhibition creates a complex and stratified spatial configuration. The room itself becomes a screening surface, although the exhibits are never entirely concealed: the floor lighting outlines the objects placed at the centre of the space, while the display cases on the walls remain visible under the projections that enfold them.

'When the Big Picture Show is on, the Main Exhibition Space is a bit like a large cinema', we can read on the museum guide.¹² What are then the forms of negotiation between the two *dispositifs*? When the walls are turned at regular intervals into projection surfaces, the dynamic at play is at least two-fold: spatial and temporal. Spatially, we have an extension (or, to quote from the title of Gene Youngblood's well-known study, an *expansion*¹³) of the projection area to the entire exhibition room, exhibits and visitors included. In other words, what we have here is not a screen inscribed in an environment, but an environment that becomes a screen. Visitors must face a series of montage strategies that involve both the sequence of images and the individual projections that compose the overall show.

A further level of montage is provided, at least potentially, by the visitor's movements: unlike in a movie theatre, he or she is free to move around, to explore the environment following independent, individual or collective paths, and to carve out a personal and meaningful itinerary. However, in practice, visitors do not usually behave this way: from what I could observe, they rather tend to stand still, sit down, or quickly move towards a position that offers good visibility, joining their former group or creating new ones

before scattering again at the end of the show. This behaviour, besides, is already foreseen in the museum's design, which may explain the benches placed against the walls or the following note in the brochure: 'we advise you to remain still while the show is on'.¹⁴ Another guide, addressed to schools, does indicate that 'ideally the Big Picture Show should be experienced by walking around the Main Exhibition Space'.¹⁵ However, this advice is immediately followed by a list and map of best positions from which one can watch the show as a group without having to move around, a suggestion most likely prompted also by security reasons. These more or less explicit (and more or less contradictory) directions orient the traditional forms of museum reception towards more cinematic forms, somewhat inhibiting more complex modes of negotiation between the two *dispositifs*, such as the visitor's mobility during the show.¹⁶

Moreover, the fact that the Big Picture Show is presented at regular intervals somehow mimics a typical movie schedule. The Imperial War Museum North offers a programme of audio-visual performances, approximately fifteen minutes long, presented throughout the day according to a predetermined programme that is communicated to visitors beforehand. Each show is identified by a title and a synopsis, so that the public could potentially choose the time of their visit according to the schedule. This is quite a radical change: as opposed to the traditional 'open' mode of museum reception, these schedules determine a temporality that is imposed from the outside, as in a movie theatre – to the point that the institution needs to remind the visitors that they are free to choose what (not) to watch, and when: 'if you don't want to see the Big Picture Show you can leave at any time'.¹⁷

Though visitors tend to behave as if they were attending a film projection, it does not mean that the museum is altogether turned into a movie theatre. Cinema viewing does not mechanically overlap with museum viewing, cancelling its specific features, but rather the two *dispositifs* intertwine, generating original configurations. During the Big Picture Show, visitors are fully immersed¹⁸ in the environment as their body is turned into a projection surface. They are therefore physically implicated, and their own corporality is both confirmed (as they are actual projection surfaces) and diluted in the wider environment that 'incorporates' them.

The consequences become all the more evident when considering the specific contents of the different shows. They combine heterogeneous elements, such as archival footage, animations, written documents, interviews, and specially shot films. The soundtrack makes use of the oral testimonies preserved in the Imperial War Museum audio archives: original audio recordings (such as radio broadcasts), excerpts from autobiographies read by actors, or dramatic sounds related to war. For instance, the show *The War at Home*

uses original materials to reconstruct the experience of families who stayed at home during the Second World War, and *Weapons of War* focuses on the experience of producing, using, or falling victim to weapons throughout the last centuries. The latter mixes photographs from the Imperial War Museum archives with evocative images and graphic art, accompanied by a soundtrack of audio recordings and 'original war sounds', as announced on the brochure: air-raid sirens, explosions, and gunshots. The seamless flow of images and sounds from different historical contexts and times makes it quite difficult to identify the sources.¹⁹ For instance, the section on rifles and bayonets skips from First World War trenches to contemporary armies, while the one about tanks uses footage from both world wars. More than the recognition of the individual sources or historical events, what counts here is the overall discourse on war for which the museum is responsible.

The contents of the Big Picture Show are not centred on the objective unfolding of the events or on the desire to investigate their causes, but on how these events were perceived by and affected the lives of the individuals involved.²⁰ An emblematic case in point is *Service and Separation: A Volunteer Nurse in Afghanistan*, which juxtaposes images of military camps and domestic scenes shot by the nurse herself or by her family, with a soundtrack underscoring the emotional impact. In *Remembrance*, the focus is on the personal story of the family and friends of a British soldier who died in Iraq. What is emphasised here is the image's capacity to illustrate individual stories, to evoke dramatic events, and to elicit an emotional involvement, making history and memory 'alive'. This aim is made quite explicit in the presentation of the Big Picture Show: 'it immerses you in the heart of the action, creating a complete sensory experience which is totally involving, and often very moving'.²¹ The emotional impact of this experience is further asserted by the warning broadcast at the beginning of each screening, which invites children and faint-hearted viewers to leave the room. As advertised on the museum brochure addressed to schools, 'none of the images or sounds are in themselves unsuitable for children, but the accumulation of them, and the overall experience of being in the space may be difficult for some'.²² What is crucial in the reception of the various audio-visual texts proposed by the Big Picture Show is not so much the analytical insights provided by each individual segment as the potentially overwhelming emotional impact of the whole.²³

A MOVIE THEATRE INSIDE THE MUSEUM: THE HISTORIAL CHARLES DE GAULLE

The Historical Charles de Gaulle in Paris is presented on its own website as 'an audio-visual monument'.²⁴ And indeed there is something monumental

to this elliptical space at the heart of the museum, shaped like a reversed dome and hosting a movie theatre with five screens collectively measuring 20 m x 2 m and accommodating more than 200 people. The movie theatre is not meant to be an external addition to the museum visit, but an integral component of it, a focal point to which the visitors are directed immediately after the introductory room of the exhibition.

The screening provides some basic information that helps the public understand the rest of the exhibition, in the form of a biographic documentary (an ‘emotional documentary’, as it is called in the presentation text), simply titled *Charles de Gaulle* (Olivier L. Brunet, 2005–8). It proposes a thirty-minute long portrait of de Gaulle, based on archival photographs and footage. The multi-projection display exploits virtually every possible combination of images, making an explicit reference to Abel Gance’s ‘Polyvision’, a three-screen projection device designed by the French director to show his film *Napoléon* (1927) – linking de Gaulle to Napoleon.²⁵ Gance’s system involved the simultaneous projection of three different images, playing with symmetries or contrasts to stress the pathos of several crucial episodes. Through the reference to Polyvision, the screen of the movie theatre of the Historial therefore becomes implicitly inscribed in a tradition of experimentation with multi-screen projections (from László Moholy-Nagy’s ‘polycinema’²⁶ to Gene Youngblood’s theories on ‘expanded cinema’²⁷), but also evokes the large-scale projections set up by the Lumière brothers at the Exposition Universelle of 1900, as well as the Cinerama and the IMAX screens.²⁸

In the movie theatre of the Historial Charles de Gaulle, the film requires the audience to sit still and silent from the beginning to the end while it receives the necessary information to continue the visit. Moreover, the movie theatre constitutes the architectural core of the entire museum. Inserted in an architectural context with a circular plan specially conceived by the architects Alain Moatti and Henri Rivière, the Historial is divided into three main areas that differ in terms of spatial collocation, themes, and modes of display. The immersive cinema hall is surrounded by the so-called ‘ring of history’: a circular corridor one hundred metres long, with striped glass walls that surround and envelop the visitor, on which audio-visual materials narrating the main events of de Gaulle’s epoch are projected. In the third space, the ‘alcoves’, various types of interactive devices allow for exploration of de Gaulle’s figure and political activity. The cinematic experience is therefore physically and cognitively at the heart of the museum experience: on the one hand, this choice is perfectly in line with the concept of the museum, which gives prominence to audio-visual elements; on the other, it carries a number of implications on the kind of message that is being conveyed and on the way it is meant to be received, as I will explain in the following paragraph.

An ‘Emotional Biography’

The shape of the movie theatre at the Historial Charles de Gaulle is designed to plunge the viewer into an immersive and comfortable environment – a quiet space, as it is described in the presentation brochure.²⁹ This perception is enhanced by the alveolar wooden structure, inset with more than 2,000 light bulbs, and in which the seats appear to be floating in space. The elliptically shaped screen stretches out up to the sitting area, suggesting a kind of continuum between the two. As in many contemporary museums, the structure draws attention to its own configuration before its content, and becomes itself an object of attraction and fascination.³⁰

The documentary presents in chronological order the main episodes of de Gaulle’s life and political career. A voice-over alternates with original recordings of the General’s speeches, and the solemn music soundtrack is interspersed with ‘spectacular’ examples of wartime cacophony, like bombs or sirens. The film makes use of all the possible combinations allowed by multi-projection systems. A variety of montage effects are adopted in the documentary, with a marked preference for symmetrical composition and for the repetition of frames from one screen to the next.

The most recurring framings and camera movements are tracking shots running across ecstatic crowds or following marching troops, high-angle shots on crowded squares, and head shots and low-angle bust shots of de Gaulle. The language of the documentaries and media images of the time is reinterpreted in a spectacular form, composing an epic and celebratory portrait with an explicit celebratory intent and the aim to inform by playing on the public’s emotions.

The configuration of the movie theatre on the one hand and of the contents and communication strategies on the other jointly contribute to defining the position of the viewer: sitting in an architectural structure that is both solemn and reassuring, almost surrounded by the screens conveying the epic history of de Gaulle and of France, the viewer becomes almost literally part of what is being shown, and is encouraged to identify with the crowd that celebrates the General. The powerful sense of wonder that the device aims to create in the viewer, along with the awe-inspiring treatment of the figure to which the memorial is devoted, produces a deep emotional impact on the entire museum experience, even though the continuation of the visit occasionally shifts from collective viewing modes to more individual and interactive ones.

NOTES

1. Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema*, Chapter 5, 'Cine-material Structures and Screens', pp. 165–212. On this subject, see also Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*; Bishop, *Installation Art*.
2. Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema*, p. 10.
3. Balsom draws from Bellour's 'other cinema', and defines with the term of 'othered cinema' the gallery-based practices that 'represent a site at which the cinema has become other to itself. They differ from it and yet share elements in common as well.' Balsom's aim is to 'interrogate the ways in which the boundaries between media are both articulated and blurred, to see the pair convergence/specificity as existing in a dialectical tension with one another that allows for a new thinking of historicized ontologies rather than a dissolution, or even disappearance, of a given medium'. See *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, pp. 16–17.
4. Ibid. p. 187.
5. Balsom, 'Screening Rooms', pp. 26–7.
6. See Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*.
7. See part I of this volume.
8. We refer here to the concept of 'relocation', proposed by Francesco Casetti to refer to 'the process in which a media experience is reactivated and re-purposed elsewhere in respect to the place it was formed, with alternate devices and in new environments' ('The Relocation of Cinema'). See also Casetti, 'Cinema Lost and Found: Trajectories of Relocation'.
9. Balsom, 'Screening Rooms', p. 35.
10. See the museum presentation on Studio Libeskind's website: <<http://daniel-libeskind.com/projects/imperial-war-museum-north>> (last accessed 30 September 2018).
11. Worsley, 'A Globe Ripped to Pieces'. On the design of spaces at the Imperial War Museum North, see MacLeod, et al., 'New Museum Design Cultures'.
12. Imperial War Museum North (IWM North), *Accessible and Easy to Read Guide*.
13. Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*.
14. IWM North, *Accessible and Easy to Read Guide*.
15. IWM North, *Your Visit Learning Resources*.
16. See MacLeod, et al., 'New Museum Design Cultures'. On the Big Picture Show, see also Hoskins and Holdsworth, 'Media Archaeology in/of the Museum', pp. 31–7.
17. IWM North, *Accessible and Easy to Read Guide*.
18. On the concept of 'immersion', see Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*.
19. See Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum*, p. 115.
20. See Ibid. p. 114.
21. Former presentation of the show on the IWM North's website, cited in Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum*, p. 74.
22. IWM North, *Your Visit Learning Resources*.

23. See Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum*, p. 116.
24. Available at <<http://www.musee-armee.fr/collections/base-de-donnees-des-collections/objet/salle-multi-ecrans-de-lhistorial-charles-de-gaulle.html>> (last accessed 30 September 2018).
25. On *Napoléon* see Brownlow, *Napoleon, Abel Gance's Classic Film*.
26. Moholy-Nagy proposed to explore the possibilities of projection on multiple screens, even of different sizes and shapes, assuming the creation of a device called 'polycinema' or 'simultaneous cinema', where projection surfaces were arranged on multiple levels, or semispherical screens, on which to project several films simultaneously. See Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*.
27. Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*.
28. On Cinerama, see Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*; on IMAX screens, see Acland, 'IMAX Technology and the Tourist Gaze'.
29. Historial Charles de Gaulle, *Dossier de presse*, p. 11.
30. On contemporary museum buildings, see Greub and Greub (eds), *Museums in the Twenty-First Century*.